

Closing the Expectation GAP
Between Employees and their Supervisors

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Closing the Expectation Gap

between Employees and their Supervisors

Introduction

Expectation is a common word in the English language. It is widely used in our day-to-day conversations. Phrases like “*I expect to have a good day at work*”, “*I’m expecting to do well on my test or project*”, and “*I expect to get along in my relationships*” all convey a certain degree of confidence and assurance about an action. The word carries weight, power, and influence. These attributes are even evident in how the word is uttered or inferred. In essence, it is a word of grave proportion because it evokes a certain outcome. Though commanding and direct, **expectation** does carry an illusion that can leave one chasing a set of desires or dreams as well as solidify a certain state of mind. With a word having so many variations, how is **expectation** so important in the way we measure progress and establish relationships?

The importance of expectation is critical by all standards. It is the foundation for which direction, purpose and fulfillment rests. The beginning of any situation has at its core a certain picture, image, or perception. “I’d like a life like this...”, “I’d like a job like that...”, “I want my family to be this way...”. We create these perceptions based on models, traditions or current trends and/or culture. The development of these events move through waves of transformation that massages, adjusts or sometimes reshapes the picture. What remains may not always meet our original expectation. Keeping up with

that image demands much physical and mental exhaustion to be released, often placing weight and burden far more involved than originally conceived. This gives place to question and doubt.

In an effort to address a growing issue between working relationships (employee vs. employer, co-worker vs. co-worker, family vs. family) with regard to how expectations of job performances, team assignments and basic human interaction are being affected, particularly as it relates to the quality and depth of such relationships, I will attempt to determine what factors contribute to this issue and offer specific recommendations toward reducing and/or minimizing this growing problem.

Background

Self-fulfilling prophecy (more commonly known as the Pygmalion Effect), is a concept by Robert Merton, a professor of sociology at Columbia University that became a phenomenon due to a belief that what a person comes to expect, whether fact or fiction, creates a behavior that makes that perception true to that person. This idea emerged from an ancient myth surrounding a sculptor name Pygmalion who sought to create a statue of an ideal woman. As the story is told, this Prince of Cyprus desired to have an image on which to gaze and admire. Much to his delight, the image, whom he named Galatea became so idealistic that it drew strong emotion based on the beauty it represented. As this emotion grew, unnatural affection of love began to arise. Concluding that his creation was the ultimate example of what perfection in a human figure would be, Pygmalion

prayed to the goddess of Venus to bring Galatea to life. As with most myths, his request was granted and the two went off together in the sunset.¹

Pygmalion's expectation (or the picture of perfection) was a manifestation of his ultimate reward of "life happy ever after" because everything he imagined came true. Everything he formulated about Galatea was realized without compromise or sacrifice. With Galatea now a human, one question is sure; would her beauty sustain him toward forever satisfaction? This question, if applied in today's world would probably yield a different set of outcomes. The truth of change challenges our expectations. Unforeseen events, physical design, and other acts of nature intrude our lives without permission, thus altering results that may be different from what we first perceived. Depending on how real our expectations are will determine their true outcome. Today, it is unlikely that a perfect person (Galatea), tasks, or outcome would magically appear in its original design let alone remain in its original state, but with focused attention and mutual participation, gaps in any expectation can be minimized.

Application

One of the primary reasons for selecting this topic centered on a number of negative experiences between staff members and their supervisors with regard to expectations. The issue seems to heighten during delivery of the Employee Performance Management System (EPMS). What is perceived, particularly in the minds of staff, is that "exceptional performance" should always be awarded based on effort alone. If a "satisfactory" rating was received, the view is often taken (sometimes outwardly

¹ Article "Better Management by Perception" www.accel-team.com Tenth Book of Metamorphoses

expressed) as “failure”. The perception is also that satisfactory ratings hinder or eliminate opportunities for salary increases, promotions, and perceived competence. This situation sparked my interest as to why such divisions exist between persons presumably accountable to each other, and why would they not share the same mind set when it came to evaluating the results of a task seemingly based on understood criteria? Because outcomes stemming from these situations were resulting in relationship issues, lack of aspiration toward new endeavors, and low performance, it seemed worthwhile to investigate any root causes. My question gave way to some unique areas, that if explored may bring awareness and could potentially serve in some preventive capacity. Therefore as a focal point, this project will emphasize ideals and common practices surrounding emotional values (same mind set), accountability, and the power of agreement (understood criteria).

Real Experience

A survey polled eleven (11) randomly selected employees and twelve (12) randomly selected supervisors who were not in a direct relationship to each other in an attempt to extract opinions related to values, expectations, and accountability (see Appendix A). Nine (9) employees and seven (7) supervisors responded, representing 82% and 58% respectively. One objective of the survey was to first determine what principles people used from their own belief systems. As I learned about Emotional Intelligence, I recognized that our views (both internal and external) shape how our relationships begin and how they sustain themselves. Its definition “being a master aptitude, a capacity that

profoundly affects all other abilities, either facilitating or interfering with them²” was thought provoking. The way we think (our aptitude) and the way we interact dictates the degree of success we may experience in our relationships. A philosophy coined as the “Amygdala Highjacking” teaches that our brainstem, limbic system and cortex/neocortex houses information/experiences of our past that influences our future reactions when presented with similar experiences. The way we think of ourselves today in the area of attitude, knowledge and behavior could be a direct result of how others have responded to us in the past. Thus giving way to some sharp contrast as to how we may be perceived socially.

According to the survey, 67% of the employees responding believe they are exceptional employees; always going beyond what is expected of them in the workplace (See Appendix B, Exhibit 1). This belief system allows motivation to come from within rather than a reliance on external factors. Not that external recognition is never sought or welcomed; it’s just not a primary driver. These employees based their belief on personal up-bringing, a desire to please, and an exhibition of pride or self-worth. Their belief is that others (peers, supervisor, etc) share the same views of their work behavior. If issues arise with their performance, it’s their opinion that it results from complacency on the part of the other party (peer, supervisor, etc) which sometimes lead to feelings of them being taken for granted. A separate question asked supervisors what qualities were important to them in employees. The intent of the question was to determine if any correlation exist between qualities supporting value systems expressed by employees. The results showed that honesty, work ethics, and initiative ranked the highest among all

² Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*

qualities stated. Specifically, 5 supervisors along with 4 employees placed a high value toward honesty and 4 supervisors along with 8 employees placed an even higher value on work ethics. The attached chart shows those common qualities valued by all (see Appendix B exhibit 2)

So if both employee and employer have similar foundations of self image and expectations, why does there still appear to be GAPs in their expectations? Perhaps our attention should not just focus on what we each possess, but on how we respond to each other and in what regard.

Analysis of the Problem

The intent of most workers, whether staff or management is to do well. They enter the workforce with attitudes of excitement, enthusiasm, and joy. Each sees his role in various contributing ways either because of their education, ideas, and/or proven abilities. With these inputs, one would expect working atmospheres to be productive, positive and creative. After short periods though, things begin to change. Excitement turns to boredom, enthusiasm turns to a lack of interest, and joy turns to frustration. Somehow these sharp turns result from a major change in what our expectations were based on, or to how those expectations were responded.. Before assessing whether these expectations are realistic or not, one critical point to consider is the response one gets to his expectations. If dissatisfaction and disappointment are experienced, it becomes oppositional to some of the same fundamental principles that make up our value systems.

This became evident from the survey in response to a question concerning regrets and dissatisfaction (See Appendix B exhibit 3). Both employees and employers were in agreement that such circumstances exist and were open about their experiences. Comments like “Under-performing”, “inexperience”, and “lack of initiative” were recurring expressions from supervisors as to what disappointed them with employees, whereas “unfairness”, “disorganization”, and “lack of purpose” were disappointments expressed by employees. If each group knew what the other party felt, a typical reaction would probably spur resistance instead of reshaping any self-proclaimed perceptions that could lead to more constructive communications. Regrets that were expressed centered on not taking full advantage of certain opportunities, and/or changing work environment. The point of the question was to show just how easy it is for plans to be altered. Granted the responses were more personal, it still relates to the GAPs in the anticipated thing not being realized..

Motivation

While exploring the effects of these altering situations against prescribed value systems, a certain influence, called motivation began to shed light in helping to conquer or minimize these “GAP” situations. It was mentioned earlier that most folks polled had an internal, more self-directed attitude toward motivation. However, when it came to the workplace there was an expectation that “motivation” should be created. Most expectations evolved around the “exchange” factor of one action for another, such as “I’ll do something for you if you do something for me”. Perhaps unconsciously, we create environments that only cater to our own needs without consideration for the needs of

others by using words or phrases that spur undesirable actions. For instance, the underline tone or meaning assumed in the phrase “will I get a raise for doing this task?” or “be grateful you have a job” does not necessary invoke the best motivation. Usually such statements are taken as ultimatums if either party does not deliver on what may have been agreed. In any regard, a healthy work environment is not being nurtured.

In his book “Drive, The Surprising Truth of What Motivates Us”, Dan Pinks discusses two types of motivation which yield distinctive responses toward an expected result.³ He addresses the theory of Extrinsic Motivation and Intrinsic Motivation.

Extrinsic Motivation addresses our existence from a market or commercial perspective. Statements like “I need this job” or “what do I get for doing this” become drivers to influence outcomes. These types of motivators don’t always take on the popular meaning of what excites us; rather it becomes an end to a means. Techniques such as strict time schedules or promises of big raises are used to get work out of employees. Because these extrinsic situations do exist, most people are willing to exchange or suppress more internal values of how they approach assignments for quicker and sometimes less meaningful work outputs. An attitude that “time is money” girds us toward directing or doing tasks that have little to no return on any of our value systems.

An intrinsic motivator addresses a more social perspective for relationship building and association. Emphasis is placed on responding to more intangible aspects of our emotions; areas that have more sensitive reactions of sorts similar to “feel good”

³ Behavioral Economics of Intrinsic Motivation.

gestures or efforts. Because these senses are brought into play, outcomes are driven by a more internal satisfaction for doing well. Various forms of intangibles like “trust”, “honesty” and “thank-you” take on greater meaning of value and appreciation. In atmospheres where such attributes are recognized, they are reciprocated as others learn their importance and respect. As evident from the survey, supervisors have more confidence that work will be done without a lot of interference from those who exhibit such traits. Since these traits are honored to a greater degree, many come to expect that it’s a value measure all should be following.

The author emphasizes certain risks involved with this type of motivation particularly if misapplied or misinterpreted. Serious set-backs in performances can occur. For example, if a supervisor is not able to maintain the social relationship due to time commitments or other priorities, he may invoke emotional feelings of abandonment and abuse from staff, which may jeopardize certain outputs. As a guide, the supervisor is encouraged to set certain boundaries or realistic expectations when applying this concept.

Accountability

Another influence affecting gaps in expectation is accountability. In its basic form, the term means to hold someone responsible or answerable to a particular act or function. It too assumes a serious connotation because it singles out or separates something or someone to stand on its own. It affects principles and belief systems due to its ethical association and reflection of who we are as people. It builds a self-reliance that says we take ownership; we’re dependable and honorable. Individuals value this as an attribute because it invokes trust. From an internet search on the subject of accountability,

an unknown speaker addresses factors that equate back to internal values and their affects on relations. He notes three main questions to ask ourselves as we address accountability: (1) What promises have we made of ourselves, (2) What claims have we made about our work abilities, and (3) How do they reflect our integrity⁴. From these queries, it's important that we take stock in first being true to ourselves before attempting to interact with others, being true about whether we embellish or exaggerate our skills, and also being true about who we are when no one is looking. Another writer express that this "*willingness to be accountable for what we do and what we fail or refuse to do is a critical sign of character*"⁵. As we project these attributes, it is clear how we may establish expectations and how they influences perceptions. The challenge rests with correctly matching the perception with what we really are verses what we portray. It is also interesting to note the writer's definition of *unaccountability*. She characterizes these action as "being into excuses, blaming others, putting things off, doing the minimum, acting confused and playing helpless. They pretend ignorance while hiding behind doors, computers, paperwork....."⁵. These actions certainly raise flags as we seek to understand the origin of such behaviors. Are these behaviors brought on by some external influence based on the application of an inappropriate motivation factor or is it the unraveling of an illusion one maybe hiding? A theory called Cognitive dissonance⁶ may support the reason for the illusion. The theory was introduced in 1956 by a US psychologist named Leon Festinger. He started with a very simple proposition that if a person holds two cognitions (a certain belief or mental position) that are psychologically inconsistent, the person experiences *Dissonance*: a conflicting, unpleasant inter-emotion that becomes unsettling.

⁴ www.youtube.com/v/D-CIR8rvUsA

⁵ Dianne Schilling's Article "The Power of Accountability" www.womensmedia.com/grow

⁶ http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/cognitive_dissonance.htm

For example, if one believes he is an exceptional performer, but routinely receives performance ratings that measure his performance as “ordinary or standard”, this has the potential to create a conflict in his self perception of being an exceptional performer. Because the experience of dissonance is unpleasant, the person will strive to reduce it—usually by struggling to find a way to change one or both cognitions to make them more consonant with one another⁶ From this philosophy, we see that facing a certain fact about self image doesn’t always change one’s state of mind, but it has the potential to create a inter-battle that should produce self- awareness. As a result Cognitive Dissonance can become an effective tool to spark change.

Where accountability can take a turn is when it is not applied consistently. Often times, both employee and supervisor lose focus on the benefits of correctly exercising this tool. There’s a sense of complacency that develops, creating an unrealistic expectation that everything is going well. As a result, a certain degree of accountability is deployed. If the relationship operates on high levels of trust, the accountability shines in the value being exhibited. “I know he can do the job because I trust him”. In these situations monitoring or other interactions are sometimes thought to be unnecessary. On the part of the supervisor, this practice can contribute to expectation gaps in performance outcomes because it discounts any knowledge of staff’s true ability to perform. A false perception leads the supervisor to believe that if constant monitoring or other forms of oversight (sometimes thought of as “micromanaging”) are displayed, the “trusted staff” would perceive the monitoring as mistrust or a sense of not having the ability for doing the task. Therefore the supervisor may limit the monitoring to avoid this uncomfortable

situation. On the other hand, the employee could be operating out of the same trust factor that the supervisor will provide the necessary support, but feels a sense of disappointment when the support does not happen.. When these situations occur, they spark emotions that come up against our value systems and challenge our motivation, which certainly affects our performance. Because these situations sometimes go on without open communication, relationships suffer. An accumulation of these feelings create shields that serve as a protection against subsequent “attacks” to our self-declared value systems.

In contrast, where low trust is felt, supervisors and employees usually attempt to invoke more accountability, but from a negative perspective. In this regard, an unlikely reaction usually emerges that still doesn’t produce a harmonious situation As an example, assignments can be given by supervisors or requests can be made by employees in tones, whether intentional or by accident, that are strong, demanding and non-negotiable. Little to no direction, explanation or feedback occurs, and follow-up is limited. This delivery style paves way for the receiving party to confuse or invoke unsupported emotions behind the assignment or request as to its intent. Both the supervisor and the employee may feel each is being set up for something that will have consequential effect. While results can not be managed unless individuals are held accountable, the form in which we exercise this determines its quality as well as the manner in which it is delivered. Will it result in attitudes of folks “just doing the job” or taking more ownership for how the job is done.

Results from the survey shed some insight on this concept. With a combined rate of 38% of the employees indicating “**not always doing** more than what is asked of them”, and of those admitting to “mainly **doing** what is ask of them”, it’s enough of a percentage to examine why employees take such positions (see Appendix B, exhibit 1). Some of the responses addressed competing priorities, which made it difficult to stay with a certain task or project for long periods. The work was completed, but not at the quality standard set by the employee. Another response frankly associated the issue with a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of a strong work ethic exhibited by the employee. In these situations, a person’s defined quality and work-ethic (components of their perceived internal value system) came into question based on their interpretation of surrounding circumstances. Whether these circumstances were high work volumes, insufficient staff, and/or management response, their reaction changed their motivation to perform. Considering that many of these issues were outside influences, the way they are handled triggers an internal switch to motivate an outcome. If left unattended, greater indifferences could occur, thus widening the gaps in expectations.

Accountability is also affected by the language we use. Our language is how we convey our intentions or expectations and it influences how it gets interpreted. Language is one of the most persuasive tools use to direct a particular outcome. It is both verbal and non-verbal. It also serves in capacities that compliment and contradicts. It is easy to assume that everyone knows or can pick up what we mean when we speak. But should assumptions be the basis for what we want or expect from people? Because language is so versatile, it takes on different meaning for difference people. To say to someone “you

do a good job” relays a certain message that may not be the same as the sender intended. From the sender’s point of view, the meaning could be a cordial exchange, recognition of an effort, or some other pleasantry. To the receiver, it could confirm a level of output, a state of mind, or something altogether different. With each conveyance a certain expectation is established as the foundation for any future exchanges. An internet search uncovered a resource that provided useful information on the influence of language with regard to expectations. In his book “Winning with Accountability”, author Henry Evans writes that “language achieves stimulation of opinions and the creation of emotional responses”⁷. Language is truly that vehicle by which we transfer our thoughts and beliefs to others for their reaction. The emotional association again supports the value systems we all bring to every relationship, though personal or professional. Whether language accomplishes our intentions becomes the ultimate challenge to overcome. It is interesting to note from this excerpt that an obvious indicator lies at the helm of this issue. It’s the ambiguity embedded in language. The author refers to a “glossary of failures”⁷, terms or phrases used in our exchanges that becomes a recipe for unrealized expectations. Because ambiguous terms lack a main ingredient called “specification”, we don’t achieve or realize the most from our encounters. The author gives a list of phrases which reflects his point. Phrases like “I’ll get to it”, “I should be able to do it”, or “I’ll try”⁷ are common to our language. We all create ambiguity as we convey instructions or respond to situations, particularly in the workplace. For example, exceptional performance is usually measured by phrases like “going beyond the call of duty” or “doing an outstanding job”. Without properly defining what these actions entail, the responder is left to create his own definition. Because most self-defined measures align themselves with our internal value

⁷ www.dynamicresults.com/read_18_new-book.php

systems (how we see ourselves), we are less likely to be constructively critical and more likely to equate ourselves with the measure being described. In our minds we've "gone beyond duty" when we've turned the report in timely. We're doing an "outstanding job" by just answer the phone. This is exactly how we see ourselves and we make the assumption that it is exactly how we have performed. So when we are measured differently, it comes to us as a surprise. But how open minded are we to critical reviews? How welcoming are we to deeper analysis that may result in different interpretations? Yes the report was turned in timely, but did it have errors? We speak to customer on the phone, but in what manner? In the employee's defense, an example of a good work product may never have been explained. When language is used without specification, it widens the expectation gaps.

Recommended Solutions

If gaps in expectations are to be removed or reduced, it is important to address the underlining approaches described in the problem analysis section. Motivation is a key to how gaps can be minimized. Because motivation is both internally created and externally provoked, we must be willing to have an open-minded approach to the factors important to all parties. We must realize that individuals need what they need, not what others have defined for them in order to be motivated toward a certain outcome. These needs must align themselves with internal value systems that define how one sees himself and ultimately how he wants to be seen by others. With regard to that view, tangible measures should be established that will either confirm or disprove one's own perception based on outcomes produced. The outcome itself should be a self-correcting tool if one is willing

and open enough to be taught by it. A person's perception must also be tested against realistic factors that are not only measurable, but timely and effective for a balance scale. Once established, this fundamental nature should be the very essence from which to spur one to action. Enticements have to correlate to this basic principle. To accomplish this, a few common but forgotten practices should be followed. First, individuals have to spend time getting to know each other. There are numerous benefits derived from this endeavor that helps the relationship building process. Second, this relationship building should be based on open and honest communication. As this step is pursued, remember to be human with each other, sharing imperfections and other normalcy to keep us relatable. Lastly, develop mutual interests in the things important to each other, and strike balances toward how each interest can be realized with compromise and agreement. Focusing more on intrinsic factors (trust, gratitude, and inclusion) are paramount to helping reach intended goals.

Accountability is the other key to minimizing gaps in our expectations. How we administer accountability will dictate the results obtained. Inconsistent application sometimes passes on a sense of complacency. Although trust is at the root of our decision to not check in or follow-up, this often leaves feelings of unimportance or abandonment. People want to be apart of something with value. They want to contribute to the greater good of something; be a part of the big picture. Being connected in these ways substantiates their existence if they truly relate to what is being valued. Where a disconnection to this purpose is felt, they don't command the most of themselves. Consistent application of accountability is also beneficial even when trust is not yet

established. It will help propel the relationship to newer heights of expectations and develop the support necessary for motivation. Of all factors deserving more attention toward reducing the expectation gap, language should be priority. Because of its diverse use and ambiguity, specification in language can not be over emphasized. While this action may require more effort, it stands to be the greatest reward in the expectation exchange.

Again, familiar but ignored steps are prudent to managing outcomes. Such things include: 1.) Open and frank conversations about how an outcome should be, 2.) Writing down instructions, processes, and procedures for later references, 3.) Giving examples to for relevance, 4.) Allow feedback to ensure mutual understanding, and 5.) Follow-up to show importance and progression toward establish goal.

Every situation is an opportunity for productive exchange, whether assumed by the employee or the supervisor. In so doing, both parties share in the responsibility of using the right tools (motivation, accountability, languages) in their expectations of an outcome. If we put first our basic human factors we increase the likelihood for expectations to be realized.

Appendix A - Questionnaire

Exhibit 1 - Employee Questions

1. How would you rate yourself as an employee:
 - a. I always go beyond what is expected of me
 - b. At times I do more, but I mainly do just what I'm asked
 - c. I do what is asked of me.
2. Please describe why you rate yourself this way.
3. Explain whether or not you believe your supervisor recognizes you at the same rating you set for your self?
4. What qualities do you think you bring to this job?
5. Do you feel your experience or state of mind is or has been influenced by and person (boss, family, friend, etc) ?
6. How do you think your peers would describe you and/or your work?
7. What would have to happen to make you perform at a different level?
8. Think back to when you were first hired, what did you expect to gain from starting this job?
9. What has been the biggest surprise since working here?
10. Have there been any regrets that haven't measured up with any original expectations?

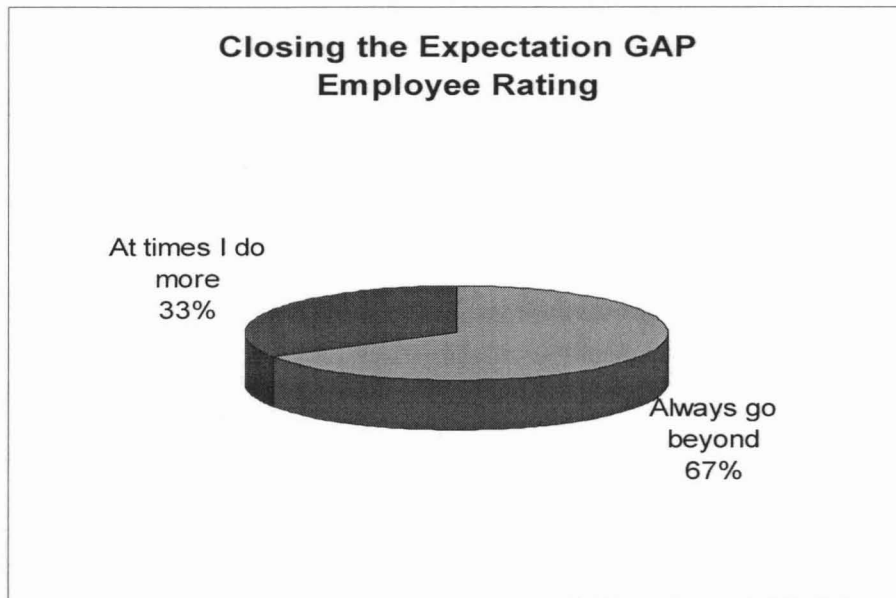
Appendix A – Questionnaire

Exhibit 2 - Supervisor Questions

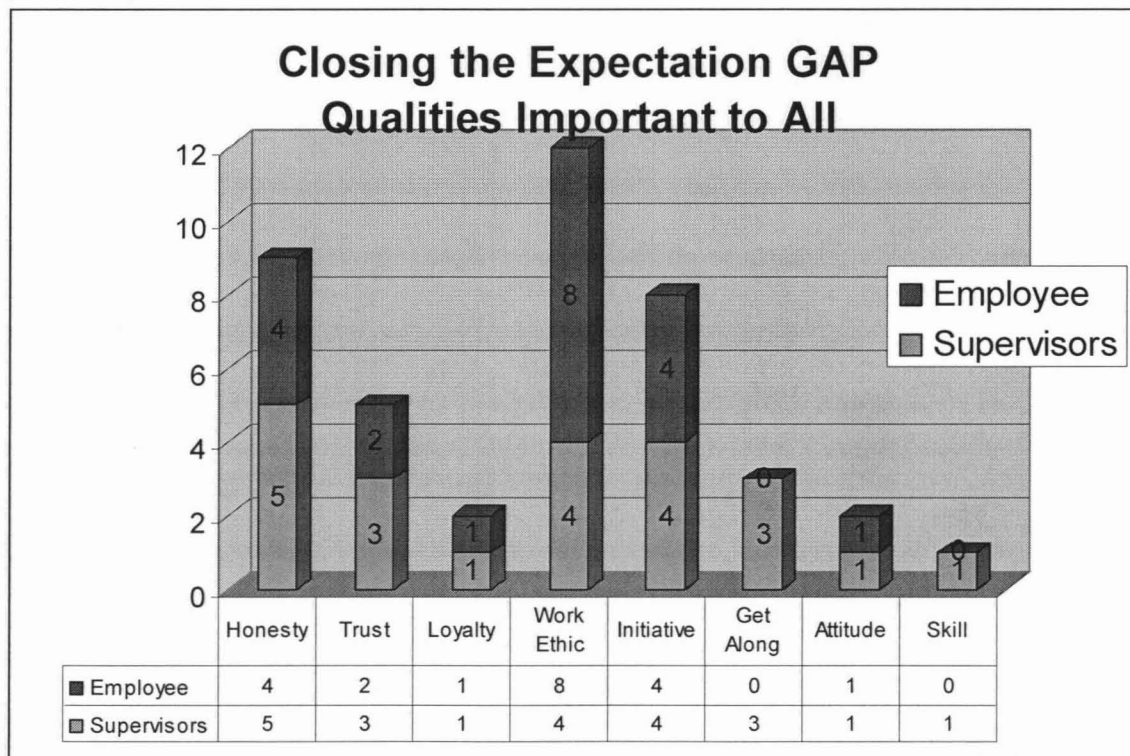
1. Using the scale below, rate your self as a supervisor
(1 = average 10 = exceptional)
 - a. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Describe or give reasons why you rate yourself this way.
3. Why did you want to become a supervisor?
4. Do you believe that you are or have fulfilled your purpose?
5. What qualities are important to you in an employee?
6. What makes you feel confident that your staff is doing their job?
7. Explain whether you've ever been disappointed with an employee's performance?
8. Do you take any responsibility for this outcome?

Appendix B – Survey Results

(Exhibit 1)

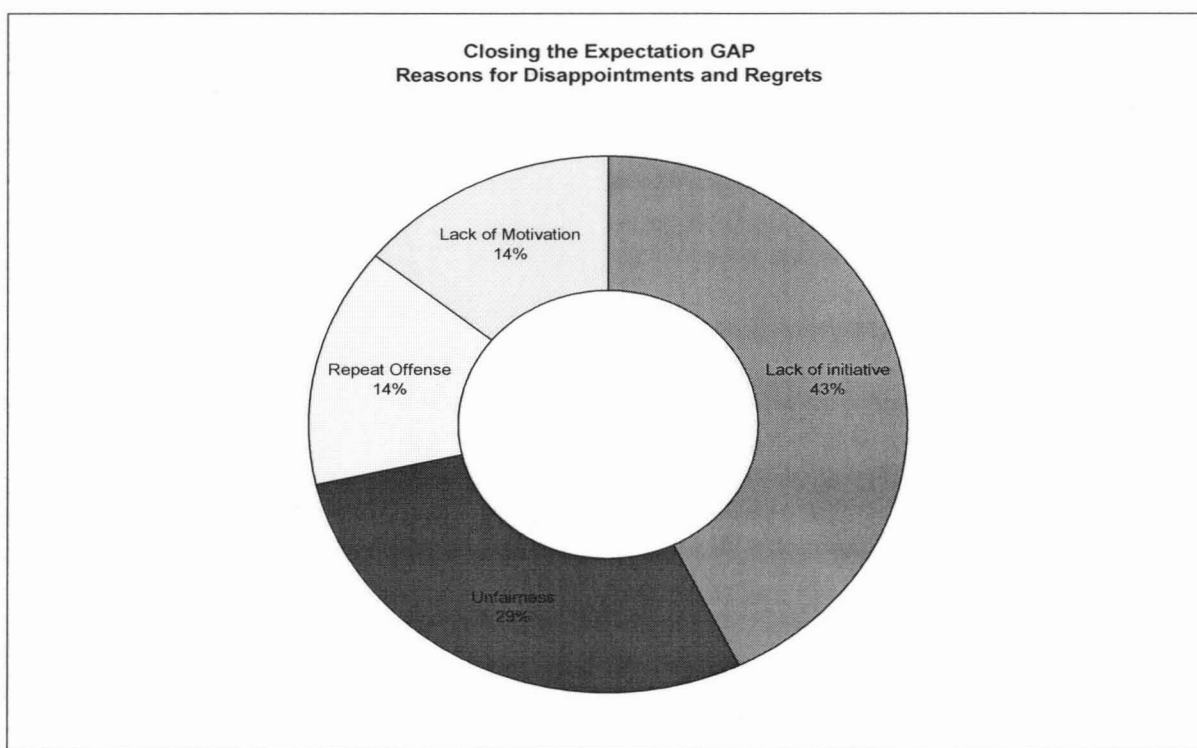


(Exhibit 2)



Appendix B (continue)

(Exhibit 3)



References

- Internet Search “Better Management by Perception” <http://www.accel-team.com/pygmalion/index.html>
- Certified Public Manager Course 2010 “Emotional Intelligence”
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